

Review of *Inside the Critics' Circle* by Phillipa K Chong (Princeton University Press)

by Nikoleta Zampaki | Book Reviews, Issue 9.2 (Fall 2020)

ABSTRACT Phillipa K. Chong's *Inside the Critics' Circle* highlights the importance of book reviews, from how they are assigned and written to critics' thoughts about who they should listen to during the review process.

KEYWORDS academic, scholarship

Inside the Critics' Circle. By Phillipa K. Chong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020, 192 pp. (hardback) ISBN: 9780691167466. US List: \$29.95.

Phillipa Chong's *Inside the Critics' Circle* explores the ways in which critics evaluate books through their own subjectivities as well as the ambiguities or uncertainties that reviewers have to face and/or overcome in their work. Chong draws on interviews she conducted with reviewers from *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Washington Post*, and she delves into the complex nature of reviewing, including the cultural and ideological criteria involved as well the various factors that shape the critic's identity.

Book reviewing today is an academic or professional practice of evaluation, and Chong's aim is to reveal how critics have responded to a huge transition in their literary value and professional ethics in the name of commercialization. The author explores how critics are paired with review assignments, while highlighting how reviews can be transformed into products when these evaluations are sold or otherwise employed by publishers. Chong also addresses critics' fears, anxiety and stresses that emerge from writing a negative review, especially as they consider the perceived impact that such a review may have to the book an author's reputation.

Chong's book is divided into three parts. In part one, Chong examines the ethics of the book reviewing, including how a potential reviewer undertakes the task of reviewing or evaluating a work. To investigate these topics, Chong conducted in-depth interviews with the above three American newspapers, and given such an "elite sample" (12-13), the study is quite impressive.

Chong also introduces here her concept of "epistemic uncertainty" (19) as a way of describing how the evaluation of fictional works entails engaging with uncertain, but knowable, ideas. Epistemic is relative with the knowledge since there are figures for the evaluation of fictions. Following the introductory chapter, Chong elaborates upon the logistics of how books are reviewed. Specifically, she distills four key topics that impact

reviewers: newsworthiness, interesting content, variety of coverage, and practical constraints (i.e., reviewer availability). In her third chapter, Chong grapples with the adage that there is “no accounting for taste,” (36), explaining that while many reviewers seek to produce a highly contextualized evaluation, there most often emerges a “critical consensus” (37).

In the second part of her book, Chong emphasizes that the reviewers’ judgements are subjective (chaotic, random, empirical etc.) and strategic; they employ aesthetic evaluation to reproduce their own status by advancing certain standards of a “good” literary production. Chong’s fourth chapter illustrates ways that critics make sense of navigating the social uncertainty of their reviews.

In her book’s final section, Chong examines the growing institutional uncertainties over the profile of a critic, even going so far as to ask questions about the existential necessity of reviewers today. Critics’ statements like “I like reading books” or “I like thinking about books” (109) reflect their own personal views on why they engage in reviewing. Chong ends her book discussing newspaper headlines like “*Death of the Critic*” (118) that indicate a current interest in deconstructing the review practice.

Moreover, Chong ultimately argues for two modes of reviewing: civilian and critical (37). In the civilian mode, reviewers are concerned with assessing the quality of a book based on instinctual responses; reviewers ask themselves whether they like a work based on their preferences. The critical mode of reviewing reflexively accounts for the first impressions of a book and then bases evaluation on specific observations of the text itself. Chong lays out a set of evaluative criteria in terms of participants’ perception in critical mode: characterization, language and prose, plot and structure, themes and ideas, and finally genre expectations. The forementioned set of criteria is evaluative in terms of the contributors’ perception of the fictions’ content. Based on these criteria Chong contains tables and figures percentages. In conclusion, Chong argues that it is:

“[critics’] personal experience as writers [and reviewees], shared stories about the other reviewers’ experiences, reflections on the status hierarchy in publishing, and the particular publication in which the review will appear that informs their individuals calculus about how they handle writing negative reviews” (p. 135).

Chong’s book brings a successful and well-argued analysis to the concise scope and structure of her project. She provides illuminating accounts of the reviewing process and points out familiar types of uncertainty that reviewers face when they write a review.

Author Information

Nikoleta Zampaki

Nikoleta Zampaki is a PhD candidate in Modern Greek Philology at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens in Greece. She has also attended courses at the Harvard Extension School, Stanford University, Western Norway University of Applied Sciences, and Pacifica Graduate Institute. Her research areas are Modern Greek, European and American poetry (nineteenth and

twentieth centuries), ecocriticism, literary theories, the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, and the interconnectedness of literature and painting. She is multilingual, working in English, French, Turkish, Romanian, and other languages in addition to Greek.

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